DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 162 236 CG 012 990

AUTHOR Hagestad, Gunhild O.; Snow, Robert B.
TITLE Young Adult Offspring as Interpersonal Resources in Middle Age.
PUB DATE Nov 77
NOTE 11p.; Paper presented at the Annual Conference of the Gerontological Society (30th, San Francisco, California, November, 1978)

EDRS PRICE MF-$0.83 HC-$1.67 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Adult Development; *Attachment Behavior; *Family Life; Family Structure; *Middle Class Parents; *Mothers; *Parent Attitudes; *Parent Child Relationship; Parent Role; Psychological Patterns; Research Projects
IDENTIFIERS *Empty Nest

ABSTRACT

Examined was the transition made by parents to the "empty nest" phase of family development. Two basic hypotheses were tested: children's growing independence and departure from the home does not represent loss for most parents, but rather is experienced as a gain; and men and women appear to experience the transition differently and show contrasts in the extent to which they utilize children as resources. Interviews with middle-class families (N=22) in the "launching" phase of family development indicated that: (1) the transition stage was best described as a period of role re-alignment; (2) women's exchange with children was characterized by greater intensity and higher degree of reciprocity in the area of emotional support than was the case for men; and (3) the mother-daughter relationship appeared to be unique among the possible parent-child pairs. There is a need for further research on the quality of ties between adults and their parents. (KA)

****
* Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made *
* from the original document. *
****

ED162236

Young Adult Offspring as Interpersonal Resources in Middle Age

Gunhild O. Hagestad
Robert B. Snow

Committee on Human Development
The University of Chicago

"PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE THIS MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY

G. Hagestad

TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC) AND USERS OF THE ERIC SYSTEM."

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH, EDUCATION & WELFARE
NATIONAL INSTITUTE OF EDUCATION

THIS DOCUMENT HAS BEEN REPRODUCED EXACTLY AS RECEIVED FROM THE PERSON OR ORGANIZATION ORIGINATING IT. POINTS OF VIEW OR OPINIONS STATED DO NOT NECESSARILY REPRESENT OFFICIAL NATIONAL INSTITUTE OF EDUCATION POSITION OR POLICY

Paper delivered at the annual meeting of the Gerontological Society.
San Francisco, November, 1977

CG012990

The Topic and Its Context

We are suggesting a new look at what happens to parents in the transition to "the empty nest" phase of family development. Our paper will present two basic arguments. First, children's growing independence and departure from the home does not represent loss for most parents, but is rather experienced as a gain. This sense of gain has two components: a new-won freedom and a new set of resource persons, namely young adult offspring. Second, men and women appear to experience the transition differently and show contrasts in the extent to which they utilize children as resources. Furthermore, sons and daughters function as different types of relevant others for their parents. It therefore becomes important to consider the range of parent-child systems in looking for patterns of interaction and exchange.

We shall address each of these points below, using some findings from an exploratory study of twenty families in the Chicago area. First, however, a few words on the background for the study.

In the early 1970's, 120 mothers of college students in the Midwest responded to a questionnaire dealing with reactions to having children become adults (Hagestad, 1977). The study found that for the majority of the women, the transition to the empty nest was characterized by new freedom and new opportunities. The women also viewed their maturing children as important resources--people to count on. This was particularly true for daughters. These findings made us ask whether men would display similar patterns to those found in a sample of women. They also raised questions regarding the differences between sons and daughters. We therefore decided to interview a small sample of men and women. Twenty middle-class families in the Chicago metropolitan area were contacted. All of them were in the "launching" phase of family development. In each family, we interviewed both the mother and father, and obtained questionnaire responses from a young

adult child. In ten families the young adult was a daughter--in the other ten, a son.

From each family, we have both the mother and the father discussing the same child. For many questions, there are reciprocal data from the questionnaire administered to the young adult, but our discussion will concentrate on some trends in the parent interviews. Given the sample size, we shall focus on qualitative patterns in the responses and issues they raise for further research.

Men and Women at "Launching": Evaluations of the Stage

We asked the parents what constituted the most difficult--and the best--part of being their current age. Similar to findings reported by Neugarten (1967), we found most answers to the first question to deal with general age-related changes, either expressed as a sense of the "weakness of the body" or as a new awareness of the finitude of time. Here are some typical statements:

- -

You realize you may not have time to do the things you really want to do.

- -

You keep wondering whether or not you are going downhill.

By many, a new sense of urgency was expressed; a need for reassessment of priorities in the allocation of time and energy. This, we argue, is the background against which the decreasing role demands of the parent role must be seen. The welcoming of new-found freedom and stability are common themes in answers to the second question: What is the best part about your present life stage?

From fathers, the most common response was a sense of accomplishment, of jobs well done. One man said it this way:

- -

You feel that things have worked out. You need not worry any longer. I used to have fears taht the kids might not survive--or not turn out right. Now they are happy and productive. We made it!

Among mothers, the most common theme was freedom, often expressed with

exuberance:

> It's great! You don't have any little ones to worry about . . . The joy of adult children is mammoth! It's a friend to a friend--sharing as adults.

The statement is typical. When children were mentioned in talking about the current life stage, there was not a theme of losing them, but of gaining a new type of relationship. One mother said it this way: "I haven't lost a daughter, I have gained a confidante." Thus, many of the parents discussed the children as a new kind of significant other in their lives, as people who contributed two kinds of resources: emotional support and social influence.

Children as Resources: Emotional Support

Practically all of the mothers and fathers interviewed felt that their child usually was emotionally sensitive, sensing their feelings and moods. However, mothers seemed to seek out the child for support more than fathers. We asked the parents if they discussed their own personal problems and worries with the child. Mothers were about three times as likely as fathers to say that they often discussed such matters with the child.

This same pattern,of active use of children as resources by mothers more than fathers, emerged in questions regarding influence.

Influence from Child to Parent

The parents were questioned about possible influence from their children in two ways. First, we asked if they could think of ways in which the child had influenced them without conscious efforts to do so. Second, at another point in the interview, they were given a list of possible spheres of influence and asked to check any in which their child had tried to change them. When the parents could recall such efforts, they were asked whether or not the child was successful in changing them. The areas included in the list were items which had been found to be frequently mentioned in the earlier research on college students and their mothers by Hagestad (1977).

Responding to this structured question, asking about the child consciously trying to influence the parent, 3/4 of the mothers and 1/3 of the fathers reported that the child had tried to change them in some way or another, with at least partial success. In the case of mothers, the most commonly checked sphere of influence was activities outside the home, in work, education, or leisure. Several women reported, for example, that the child had been a major impetus in a decision to go back to school or work. As a close second came views on current issues--views on social issues were also frequently mentioned by fathers, who in addition reported attempts by the child to influence physical appearance, fitness or grooming.

The difference between mothers and fathers was much less pronounced when we moved from the question of conscious influence effort to asking, in an open-ended question, whether the child had influenced the parent without really attempting to do so.

Two clear themes emerged in the parents' answers to the latter question. First, there was one that we might call <u>modeling</u>. In statements strikingly similar to the way in which a child would speak of a parent with whom he identifies, both mothers and fathers described their child as somebody who represented an example; somebody to emulate. Here are some quotes:

- -

"Her tolerance, patience, and sensitivity to others have made me a better person."

- -

"His perseverance, his tenacity, have been a real inspiration to me."

One father said:

"You know, not infrequently, I find myself in situations where I ask myself how Steve might handle it if he were me."

The other major theme in parents' responses to this question was children as cohort bridges. A number of them spoke, often with great intensity, about how their own children enabled them to better understand "the younger generation"--their moral codes, styles of dress or music--by making the unfamiliar

familiar. A father who is a high school teacher, talked of how he applied insights gained from his son in the classroom. Here are some other statements from parents:

- -

"I don't think I ever would have been able to understand why young people were demonstrating against the war if it weren't for my son."

- -

"Would you believe it--I have learned to appreciate his music!"

- -

"Watching her make her decisions, choosing her life, has made me more understanding of the new morals."

When we combined responses from the two questions regarding influence from child to parent, we found that 70% of the fathers and 85% of the mothers identified some form of influence from their young adult child.

We would conclude that for both men and women, young adult children serve as bridges to the wider social context, mediating cultural and social changes. They may also be important links to non-family spheres for women, during a time when many of them engage in a new exploration of activities outside the realm of the family.

One could speculate about why mothers appear to receive more active influence from children than fathers do. It is possible that men seek out influence much less, because they have more non-family resources at their disposal. It could also be that women are more open to socialization by their children because of stronger emotional ties and more intense relationships with them. Some findings from these families suggest that the latter might be the case, as we found some interesting contrasts between mother-child and father-child pairs, and between sons and daughters.

Parent-Child Subsystems

We compared the various parent-child pairs on three aspects of their interaction: intensity, reciprocity, and consensus.

The intensity of the interaction in the present duscussion, is the rate of support and influence from the child, as experienced by the parent. In both these spheres of interaction, mothers reported receiving more than did fathers. In the area of influence, mothers saw daughters as giving somewhat more than sons. When it came to support, the rates were about the same for sons and daughters. This is similar to findings from the questionnaire study of mothers, mentioned earlier.

A measure of reciprocity was developed, combining the parent's report on rates of giving and receiving support. Mothers were found to perceive their relationship with the child in question as a balanced one. That is, they saw themselves as giving about as much as they were receiving. The most clearly balanced parent-child pair was that between mother and daughter. The dyad with the most clear imbalance was that consisting of father and daughter. Fathers reported receiving considerably more support than they saw themselves as giving. Reports from daughters produced a similar picture.

Finally, we combined reports from children and parents in order to look at the degree of consensus regarding the nature of their relationship. Again, the mother-daughter pair was found to be unique, with a rather remarkable consensus on their interaction. In general, fathers tended to judge the interaction as more positive and supportive than the child did.

Summary and Discussion

We sought to present a few key points.

First, while it has been common in past discussions of the transition to the empty nest stage to see it as "loss of the parent-role", particularly for women, (e.g. Bart, 1970; Blau, 1973; Lidz, 1968; Osofsky and Seidenberg, 1970) it is better described as a period of role re-alignment. The need for re-alignment is brought about by developmental changes, not only on the part of the child, but also in the parent. As the children are entering adulthood,

the parents are facing the issues of middle age. For most of them, decreasing role demands in the parent role represent a welcome change, allowing them time and energy at their own command at a point when that is becoming increasingly important. In most cases, parents and children seek what Deutscher has called "a new reciprocity"; a relationship characterized by exchange between adults. Thus, rather than loss, parents are likely to experience a sense of gain, both because of new freedom, and because they are finding that while the children are not making as many demands as they used to, they have a new readiness and ability to give. We have discussed how most of the parents we interviewed saw their children as providers of emotional support and influence. In particular, mature children appear to be important bridges to non-family spheres and a changing socio-cultural context.

Second, women's exchange with children is characterized by greater intensity and higher degree of reciprocity in the area of emotional support than is the case for men. Thus, mothers' long-term involvement in parenting may pay dividends in the middle years, as they seem more able to effectively use children as resources than do fathers.

Third, as reported by a number of family researchers earlier, the mother-daughter relationship appears to be unique among the possible parent-child pairs. (E.g., Adams, 1968; Aldous and Hill, 1965) In the families we looked at, this was the dyad with the highest rate of exchange and the most reciprocity. There also appeared to be more of a common "construction of reality" between mothers and daughters than in other parent-child pairs. That is, mothers and daughters share a common perception of what their interaction is like.

In closing, a few remarks about needed future research.

Future Work

Much work is needed on the quality of ties between adults and their parents, considering the range of parent-child systems as suggested by Brim (1957). As we have pointed out, not only do the various parent-child pairs show different patterns of exchange, but the actors in these small social systems do not always tell congruent, or even overlapping, stories of their interaction. It also seems reasonable to assume that one would find varying degrees of congruence in different pairs. Systematic comparisons between the four types of parent-child systems are needed, exploring the quality of ties, the intensity of exchanges, the degree of balance in the exchanges, and the extent to which these role partners have consensus regarding their relationship. Furthermore, a developmental view must be kept in mind, as we follow the dyads from the parent's first recognition that the child is becoming an adult, to the child's often hesitant realization that the parent is becoming old. Some new and unexpected patterns may appear, particularly with regard to male-female differences, if we consider the total duration of parent-child ties. Currently, at the University of Chicago, we are engaged in a study of more than 150 three-generational families. Through intensive interviews with four members of each family, we hope to shed some light on the questions raised above.

References

Adams, B. Kinship in an urban setting. Chicago: Markham Publishing Company. 1968

Aldous, J. & Hill, R. "Social cohesion, lineage type, and inter-generational 1965 transmission." Social Forces, 43:471-482.

Bart, P. "Mother Portnoy's Complaints." Transaction, 8:69. 1970

Blau, Z.S. Old Age in a Changing Society. NY: New Viewpoints. 1973

Brim, O.G. The parent-child relationship as a social system. Child Develop- 1957 ment, 28:343-364.

Haqestad, G.O. "Role change in Adulthood: The transition to the empty nest." 1977 Paper submitted for publication.

Neugarten, B.L. "The awareness of middle age" in R. Owen (ed.), Middle Age. 1967 London: British Broadcasting Corp.

Osofsky, J.J. & R. Seidenberg. "Is female menopausal depression inevitable?" 1970 Obstetrics and Gynecology, 36:611-615.